

Lyme Regis Museum
History of Lyme in Museum Objects
4. 13th CENTURY: THE COMMON SEAL OF LYME
Loaned by Lyme Regis Town Council

By Thea Hawksworth



A reversed photograph of the Borough of Lyme Regis seal matrix
– a perfect image of the seal, almost impossible to obtain in wax



An impression of the same seal matrix used to seal a document by the Mayor, Alban J Woodroffe JP Esq. during the period 1910-1918 (LRM 1990/10-3)

The history of seals

The earliest seals go back as far as the time of the Egyptians, Babylonians and the Romans, but they were not used in Europe until the seventh century. They were rarely used in England until the reign of King Henry II in the twelfth century.

In an age when few ordinary people could read or write, a seal indicated three things:

- The source of a document or object; for example, if it bore the seal of the Archbishop, then that was who sent it,
- If it sealed or closed a folder or parchment with sealing wax, and that wax was broken, it would show that it had been tampered with,
- Thirdly, and most importantly, it demonstrated authenticity.

Coats of Arms, which were used on seals to indicate that authenticity, were linked to the chivalric ideal, a pledge of honour and faith, and showed, through the language of chivalry, the link to the lineage of noble families.

So important was the seal and what it stood for, that Edward III passed a law stating that any forging of his Great Seal was an act of treason, a law which still stands today.

Underlining this is the fact that these seals were often kept in small iron-bound chests, usually with four locks, all with different keys, which were held separately by four different key holders.

As these seals became more common, their use widened from royal or official stamps, and were adopted by universities, corporations (such as the Borough of Lyme Regis) or even for personal use.

Making a seal matrix and a seal

- A seal is a sealing wax impression of a metal die, called a matrix,
- A seal matrix was usually of silver, rarely of gold and was made by a goldsmith,
- The goldsmith wasn't needed if the seal was made of a base metal,
- Monarchs always approached a London goldsmith or Master of the Mint, who was himself a goldsmith,
- Middle or lower end of the market seals were usually made of bronze or, in the early thirteenth century, lead. These were made by specialist seal makers called *sigilorum* or *factor sigilorum*,
- Size usually indicated status, the larger they were, the more important – though oddly, the reverse did not necessarily follow,
- Sealing wax is a mixture of tree resin, beeswax and turpentine coloured with dyes. It is brittle, but when heated in a flame it melts. The melted wax sticks to paper, ribbon and parchment, but not the metal of the matrix, from which it takes a sharp impression and reliable impression which cannot be altered without it being obvious, or before photography, used to make another matrix except by copying, which introduces detectable differences of detail.

The Seal of the Borough of Lyme Regis

Various wax impressions of the Seal of Lyme can be seen on the right hand side of the first case in the lower gallery of the museum, together with the actual seal matrix that made some of them. The age of this matrix is unknown: it is unlikely that this is the original matrix from the 14th Century, the whereabouts of which is unknown. The matrix is held in the handle by a pin covered by a metal band. The pin is, in fact, a bent nail, and driving it in has split the beech wood handle – clearly a bodged repair. The back of the matrix disk has an integral brass loop, but much of the back is covered by hardened black and red wax and those parts which are visible bear no distinguishing marks or a date.



The brass seal matrix used by the Borough of Lyme Regis up to 1961, when a seal impress was made. The age of this matrix is not known, but it is unlikely to be the 14th Century original. Loaned by Lyme Regis Town Council.

Also in the cabinet is the first impression of a new copy of an impress seal made in 1961 which is still used by the Town Council today for authentication of important documents. The impress is a machine which has two dies, one below and one above, a mirror image, which come together when a lever is pushed down, making an impression into documents placed between the dies, although usually a red disk is first fixed to the paper. This new seal is the same size and has the same design as the old, but there are inevitable differences of detail between them, such as in the waves, the stars and the religious figures.

When was the original made?

The original seal matrix must have been made sometime between 1272 and 1290. Given that the seal bears the arms of Edward I and his wife Eleanor of Castile, and that the fee farm or royal rent of the town was paid to her, we can make an educated guess that it was made when Edward I granted Lyme a royal charter in 1284. The Charter itself would have been authenticated by another seal, that of the Great Seal of England.

Granting a royal charter in medieval times was advantageous both to the monarch and the community. Kings at this time were always busy replenishing the war chest, and were

always on the lookout for those communities who were likely to be able to pay the fee farm, or looking for the potential to pay it, and towns were, for their part, delighted to be so honoured, because of the benefits which they accrued from the granting of the charter. One of the advantages Lyme gained from this was the right to have a *gilda mercatoria* or merchants' guild, so we assume that there was already a reasonable import/export trade established here. But the greatest advantage gained by Lyme, with the granting of the Charter, was that the townsfolk became 'free burgesses', with other 'liberties and free customs' with the injunction that 'no one trouble or disturb, or molest them in person or in property'.



Left, a replica of the Great Seal of Edward I made in Bologna (LRM 1970/5). The real seal was affixed to the 1284 Lyme Regis Charter when it was sealed in Bristol.
Right, a collection of pieces of the real great seals of various English monarchs which once were fixed to the other Lyme Regis Charters which are now in the Dorset History Centre (Dorset Record Office). These pieces were left in the Borough safe or muniment room after the charters had been taken into safe keeping in the 1930s. (LRM 1935/3).

This put them at the top of the tree in this area of the South West. With this also came other privileges of great value, for example:

- Freedom from the payment of tolls and lastage
- Exemption from market dues, and other such
- And most importantly, the document gave Lyme a voice in Parliament, with the sending of two members, an arrangement which remained in place until the passing of the Reform Act of 1832.

So the Royal Seal was the means by which that precious document was authenticated, Lyme's passport to its success in trade, and its upwardly mobile townspeople were no doubt thrilled with the official recognition of its link to the Crown.

Description of the Common Seal of Lyme Regis

This description is taken from George Roberts (1834) *History of Lyme Regis*, reprinted by Lymelight Books & Lyme Regis Museum in 1996. It cannot be bettered:

A ship represented in the sea¹, having a pennon with three tails at the masthead, charged with the cross of St George. On the sides of the mast, are banners displayed, one exhibiting the three lions passant guardant of England; the other the coat armour following, viz – one and four, a castle triple towered; two and three a lion rampant. These were the Arms of Edward I and of Queen Eleanor of Castile. The date of seal determined to be between 1272 and 1290.

At the front of the vessel, is the representation of the crucifixion with the Virgin and St. John. At the stern is St. Michael the Archangel², holding a crosier and trampling on the dragon, on his left arm the shield with the cross of St George. On the border of the seal appear the sun, moon, and a star, with the legend SIGILLUM COMVNE DE LIM³

¹ The ship is a cog – the merchant vessel of the period

² Lyme Parish Church is dedicated to St. Michael and All Angels

³ Common Seal of Lyme in Latin

See also Liddiard, Maurice 2012 *Lyme Regis Regalia: A brief description and history of the Lyme Regis Civic Regalia* last accessed on the web site of Lyme Regis Town Council November 2012 www.lymeregistowncouncil.gov.uk/

© 2013 Thea Hawksworth and Lyme Regis Museum